



“We can contribute”

How people living in extreme poverty view the term sustainable development



Synthesis of interviews and visits October 2011 - January 2012 carried out with families living in extreme poverty in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Brazil in preparation for Rio+20

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1. Introduction

"We are guajeros (individuales forced to pick through garbage for a living), we are doing a favor for the planet because we take tons of garbage from the dump. For others, these things are worth nothing. However, for us, aside from being a source of income, we are doing something even better for our families moreover, for our children, for those who come after us. We are leaving behind a better planet." (D. Sorto)

It is in the poor forgotten zones of our cities and countries where the worst effects of environmental degradation combined with social and economic exclusion are visible. We see the condition of communities without basic services for decent human development. We find adults, teenagers and children forced to work under constant risk to their lives in order to earn the minimum necessary for survival. Families are forced to live in very vulnerable areas in order to assure the security that comes from ties formed within the community, invisible to the interventions of governments and international agencies.

This is the daily reality of the people interviewed in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Brazil¹. Their words tell us of the injustice they live, but above all their thought and their actions in the struggle for better living conditions in their community.

2. Living Situation

2.1 Communities and Homes

The interviews confirmed to us that overall the "favelas", settlements, or neighborhoods where the poor live, are formed by people who, for various reasons, find in them their only chance at having a roof. In order to avoid living on the street or under a bridge with their families, people gradually raise slums or "barracos" and manage to acquire a minimal infrastructure. Sometimes they even pay for their land and, generation after generation, they form a complex and lacking life style, which requires a great deal of strength and stamina to thrive in, a life style about which only those who live it can speak.

"We stay here as God wills, we have no choice because the only thing we can do is try to survive when the river passes though." (G.

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The interviews and visits occurred between the months of October 2011 until January 2012 in Honduras, Tegucigalpa- Asentamientos El Río (Barrio la Bolsa) y Flores de Oriente (Nueva Suyapa) ; El Salvador, Santa Tecla- Colonia San Rafael; Guatemala, Ciudad de Guatemala- Asentamientos Piedra Santa y Casa Cuarto Mundo, y Escuintla- Asentamiento Línea Férrea Sur; Brazil, Petrópolis- *Morro dos Anjos*.

Chavez-Honduras)

"It's dangerous to go out when the big storms come, the river carries the houses away. They have always called this zone a high risk area but they do nothing to improve the situation "(R. Alas-El Salvador)

As in Honduras and El Salvador, poor communities live many difficult situations because of flooding, air pollution, poor housing infrastructure, little or poor government support, lack of work and many other challenges to living well in community. Yet people do not stop looking for possible solutions every day to improve family and community life or recognize the progress achieved by effort from one generation to another.

"One can not say anything, they own their company, made their wall to avoid contact with people in the community. (...) There are days when it's not even raining and there is loads of water coming out (...) it's the hot water from the company, They say that they are washing the machines; that water affects you (...) further away from there burnt oil comes out (...) They say they aren't responsible for that, only they're on the other side of the wall and we're here. That machine they have over there, they grind plastic with it at night; it's horrible." (A. Castillo-El Salvador)

A plastic factory that empties all its waste onto local residents' access road and also within several houses that were built behind the colony of San Rafael, in the city of Santa Tecla, El Salvador. The chemical waste pipe comes out mostly in a public space where a large number of people circulate and also where children play. The intention of those responsible is that all waste terminates in the river, without assuming any responsibility for it, nor for the people who are affected by it. Furthermore, there is the operation of the machines which cause noise and tremors day and night in the neighborhood.

The residents endure this, unable to claim any legal right against the owners. This includes the serious risk of chemical contamination, the lack of silence, especially at night, and a complete neglect of the cracks that compromise the structure of local houses. They claim complete ignorance of any influence they could exercise to change their situation. They don't know in whom to trust in order to defend themselves.

"I'm hoarse now, because of the pollution, because of the smoke from burning trash, because we cook with wood fires. Here there are a lot of people who have to cook with wood because they say that the gas is too expensive. (...) It cost me everything to come here, since I got sick [due to the conditions]. When I used to live in different conditions, the country, everything was fine; out here in the city you get all the pollution from all the factories "(R. Alas)

"It stays dirty (the water) and is full of mosquitos with a whole bunch of leftover branches that don't let the water run. No one does anything to clean it. (...) I don't let the mosquitos breed, but that doesn't help because in the stream ... Moreover, all the piled up trash doesn't let the water run ... in those days there weren't any

mosquitos. There is dengue fever, another disease that's been around. You're afraid that a child will catch it. "(A. Castillo)

The living conditions issue is omni-present. Like many exposed to such unhealthy conditions, Mrs. Castillo suffers from constant lung related infirmities since leaving the region where she was born and going to live in the city. Leaving the countryside to seek a better economic condition, means leaving a better quality of life in the natural environment in return for all the pollution in the major metropolises. Maintaining the tradition of cooking with wood, according to the people, almost always represents nothing but the inability to access another means of preparing food, since propane gas is an unthinkable expense for most, and is offered as the only energy alternative to burning wood. Sometimes people burn the remains of garbage like plastic bags, plastic chairs and paper, further increasing the toxicity of the smoke. It is very common to find women who work daily in the preparation of tortillas, with cataract problems or chronic bronchitis, unable to heal because they can not leave work nor improve the conditions of their labor.

For Mrs. Alicia Enamorado, even with all the care she takes daily to clean water drums and teach good hygiene to her children at home, it is still not enough to protect against the diseases that are caused by the accumulation of garbage and stagnant water in the creek². The preventive work of the Secretary of Public Health is not enough to deal with all the local problems.

"Under the trees, supposedly you can breathe clean air, but you can't breathe for all the pollution that we, as neighbors, have caused. There's a dump grown up down there where there should be a beautiful park, but it's not (...) people go down there to collect junk ... they all go into the river, people, women. I heard that it has some bad consequences. Many children suffering from skin disease"(A. Morales).

Unlike the colony of San Rafael, no garbage truck passes to pick up trash on the Línea. Without any other option nor the habit of treating waste that they can not or they do not know how to reuse, almost everyone gets rid of it in the grassy area around the houses, where, for Mrs. Morales, could and should be a beautiful forest of mango trees. Nevertheless, the place conserves its beauty and serves as an open space where adults and children enjoy the outdoors, protected by the shadows of the trees and threatened by the "carpet" of decomposing garbage that accumulates below the trees.

(...) It's not connected to a river that comes from somewhere else. No, that space, they opened it only to throw their trash in it. It's not

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A small creek that serves the local community as a water source, a place to wash clothing, or for bathing.

a natural river; it's a man-made river. "(A. Morales)

Among the houses and the man-made river, in the heart of the forest, you see adults and children in search of scrap metal or other material that can be sold to increase the income of their families. Risking injury or contamination, children spend the day playing in the dump and large trees. The river flowing through the settlement is a chemical drain from the neighboring poultry farm. The pollution that it causes is also felt in the air, increasing environmental degradation.

"(..) what you see is nothing. You've got to understand, sometimes, what all of the people up there do, it happens. (..) It's too inhumane. But it is also because of her situation, not having a husband, not having a job, being a single mother. It's too much. (...) The doctor sometimes says that they're is stupid but he doesn't see the reason why they're carrying their sick children. "(A. Morales)

When you mention the condition of housing, Mrs. Morales immediately thinks of a neighbor who lives in a tougher situation than her. The lady whom she remembers every time she thinks about how families need support, is a young single mother who had three children of whom one has just died, while still an infant, and of whom the other two are disabled. A few months ago she had to quit her job, the only source of family income, because she had no one to leave her children with, seeing as they required too much assistance. Furthermore, she takes care of her niece after the death of her sister. Her only means of support is her father, an elderly gentleman who lives on the same property. Burdened with such responsibility, the situation gets worse when you look seriously at the physical conditions of all that is happening. The two children live their lives day to day at home, unable to walk or talk, sitting on the floor of the small courtyard, where an open sewage line crosses through which flow all of the household wastes from above. Leftover food and all kinds of solid waste, oftentimes back up onto their property, attracting animals and creating a source of contamination from many of the diseases even more hazardous to her children, who, because of their illness, are fragile. "Too inhuman" is the only expression used by Mrs. Morales, to try to explain the situation.

"In our community there is a lot of pollution in the air, smoke, gases, toxins from garbage. But the truth is something that perhaps cannot be changed. Many people, who come here, come and can smell it, it stinks, but all of us who already live here, we can't smell anything (...)" (L. Tepeu)

"Everybody who lives in the dump suffers from throat related illness, as does everyone nearby here, in Piedra Santa, everybody in a radius of about 3km, suffer from throat and lung infections." (D. Sorto)

In Guatemala City, the capital, lies one of the largest landfills in Central America. In that area the conditions for life and work are extremely hard, in addition to issues regarding the presence of the municipality. Mrs. Lorena

Tepeu claims to be accustomed to the conditions of Piedra Santa. Almost everyone who lives there for a long time would stop noticing the smell of toxic gases from garbage, if it weren't for the damage that they cause to people's health such as in the case of David Sorto. For years he has had a chronic disease in his tonsils which will not heal while he's still living in the area. He has been able to stop working "below", but for the moment, he has no other housing option.

"(...) in front of here on 30th street, there were many trees and it used to be a road that led to the dump. They got rid of it "in order to" rent the land for warehouses. So, for whoever wins, it's easy. No? I get rid of it all, put up warehouses and I win. But they don't think about how everyone else will live or what will be the living conditions of those people. (L. Tepeu)

At the start of operations of the landfill there were still trees around the field, but due the growth without proper planning, over so many years the forest was extinguished to make way for large warehouses used to store materials for sale after sorting "below", as is said to refer to the landfill. The people of Piedra Santa know that with more trees, many respiratory diseases due to the polluted air they endure on a day to day basis could be prevented. However, without greater support, is difficult to challenge the interests of those who exploit the activities of those warehouses that, in turn, only care about the money they are presently earning.

"They look at dirty people and they think they have nothing, that they are dirty, but it's the way we dress when we go to work down there. That's how we work because we can't stay clean "(L. Tepeu)

In the city of Petropolis, Brazil, Mrs. Luciana Vieira and Mrs. Fatima Pereira spoke of the living conditions in the favela Morro dos Anjos, in Caxambú, a neighborhood located in an area of hills and valleys. Building houses is almost always irregular, in areas of high vulnerability and, as in other resource-poor settings, the government does not act in time to prevent the formation of shanty-towns, neither do they make enough effort in finding suitable premises for people to live.

"I've seen many die because of landslides, I'm afraid of that (...) where there is no trash, there is no risk of landslides. The place is stable, I think that's how it is; I do not know if that's right. It's just how I see it." (L. Vieira)

When asked about the situation of the hillside that threatens to fall on the house every summer, the rainy season in Petropolis, Mrs. Vieira said that landslides occur due to accumulation of garbage that clogs the storm drains. These days, the municipality is responsible for picking up trash that people leave in a specific location, on Main Street at the entrance of the favela. However, it's clear that the municipal truck doesn't make its rounds consistently and not everyone cooperates, and therefore, they continue to throw their garbage bags outdoors, leaving garbage on the hills. During the rains, all the trash accumulates and prevents the water from running

properly, flooding the houses and swamping soils. The fact that they are deforested areas also causes landslides as in Flores de Oriente, Honduras.

“For not putting it (trash) in the right place, putting it in the trash, they close it off [access to their homes] and with no way to climb up. You have to wait until the rain subsides so you can go home.” (F. Pereira)

The way in which people relate to one another in the neighborhood and the lack of mutual cooperation is a powerful opinion among women. Almost everyone in the Morro dos Anjos has a low quality home infrastructure and faces alone, with meager resources, many of the adversities present in their surroundings.

“I wanted to help but I have no way of helping anyone. They are very divided, they have no help from anyone, they have no way of helping. I feel lonely because I have no friends; I have nobody here. I don’t even have a family.” (L. Vieira)

Addressing personal emergencies before seeing to communal needs seems to prevent people in the community from recognizing themselves as part of the community and from recognizing the great responsibility they bear as such, and from recognizing their inability to carry out those responsibilities on a day to day basis.

“... I have one (child) in the USA. He went there illegally. He’s been there for 8 years now. He went alone. He managed to pass the border alone and there he had a friend who helped him out when he was on the border, in Mexico (...) he spoke to me (by phone), he said to me, Mom, pray to God because I’m about to cross the border. (...) We’ve never seen each other again.” (R. Alas)

If in your surroundings there are no real opportunities to get ahead, you come to understand why the thousands of cases of emigration to the United States. This is apparent when you know the nature and quality of job opportunities for marginalized people living in discriminated areas, with substantial obstacles to receiving a formal education and subject to rejection based solely on where you come from. They risk their lives crossing the border illegally in Mexico, and later, possibly for the rest of their lives, run the risk of living in a country where they have no legal status, and therefore, no security or assurance that their basic rights will be respected. People leave their homes to risk everything, leaving behind families and friends in search of a better future, to enter the world of underemployment, often without any way to perceive or react to the humiliation they endure, since their standards for comparison are often times weak at best.

The history of how the authorities have often addressed the needs of these people, the living conditions to which they are subjected, all the negative factors listed here above, which are visible in their day to day lives, have deeply marked important aspects of their behavior. It is common in any human logic to give back to society just what you have received from it; and,

when you know about lives like these, you notice just how difficult it is to detach yourself from the everyday hard to break trend and shift to a more constructive attitude. However, there are many examples of people who cooperate and who always look to improve, like those we found for this job and like many others who have hope and a sensible resiliency in many settlements and favelas of the world.

“About 5 years ago, they put up a sign: “Anyone who enters this dump, enters at their own risk.” There is a signed paper at the municipality, all the “guajeros” signed that we enter at our own risk.” (D. Sorto)

No one takes responsibility for what can happen in this place of so much disorder and disregard for the regularity of the work happening inside. The guajeros develop their own ways to protect themselves, and continue to risk their lives because they still feel it is worth it for what they can earn.

It is with this work that many have supported and developed their families, no matter the cost of suffering and unjust practices that these workers face - youths, adults, the elderly, and children.

“They beat the minors, first they soaked everything, they threw water, then they hit them and made them lift weights to punish them for having gone to work. Not just to M. but to many youths, they beat them, they treat them like this.” (L. Tepeu)

D. Lorena Tepeu supported her whole family working as a guajera for many years, even with the death of her husband. During this time, her two older children, G. and M., took charge of many responsibilities around the house to support her, one of her daughters accompanying her regularly to work below, where the garbage was. After a large fire in 2005, they tried to regulate the activities inside the dump. One of the means was to prohibit the entrance into the dump of minors and of anyone who wasn't listed and carrying a valid guajero id card. Once, when M. was 13 years old, he tried to get around the prohibition, entering through a side where there was no control. The guards caught him. A woman told D. Lorena, and she arrived at the administration office in time to see them mistreating and torturing her son. No one cared why the children came to work, the measure wasn't at all concerned with his safety, as evidenced by the way the administration reacted. It seems they were only hoping to avoid having to respond to external problems.

D. Lorena began working with her husband, and little by little they consolidated their lives in the settlement. They were able to legalize the purchase of land, improve their house, and support all their children, even when she became a widow, all thanks to her earnings from sorting trash. The only time she tried to find other work, she was mistreated and the pay was less than what she was accustomed to. Almost all of her children are studying, and she dreams that they will make it to university.

“It was really nice because you get something there, right? But we also risk our lives every day, being hit by a car, being hit by a tractor (...). So, for me, working in the dump, despite all the risk, despite all of this, it's like they say: 'it's being in glory.'” (L. Tepeu)

“I got into the truck in the winter (rainy season), it was coming from above and the truck didn't stop at the terminal; they always stop there. It turned around and I didn't realize that the tie was tangled around my arm, and when I jumped, I got stuck to the edge of the truck.” (D. Sorto)

David had to take charge of his siblings when his mother died. He was 11 years old. With his brother, they decided to try to earn money selling the better things they had found in the dump, and doing so they survived for a long time. Today, with a wife and daughter, he decided to stop working at the site because of health problems and the many risks. He dedicates himself to buying from the guajeros and then selling the goods in the markets.

“Look, it's sinking” and we all run out, right? I didn't know many of the people who were there, I only knew one young girl who was a graduate and who worked there on Saturdays to help her mother to help her siblings to continue studying”(L. Tepeu).

“There is no day when you can say 'today I didn't cut myself,' I have thousands of scars on my hands, on my fingers, on my feet, on all sides, because down below, you always cut yourself.” (L. Tepeu)

There are an uncountable amount of landslides, with trash on top of the guajeros, like the one that killed the daughter of a guajera who went to work on a Saturday morning to help her mother. The youth didn't hear the warning cries of the people telling her about the moving soil. Cases like this, where falling mountains of trash bury the workers, have happened and still do happen. On top of that, there are the daily risks linked to the intense traffic of tractors and trucks inside the landfill, without caring for the presence of people there.

A few weeks before the interview, one of David's brothers had been hit by a truck and died while he was working below.

3. Relations with authorities/government and external actors

3.1 Absence of the state

The absence of public authority has also been decried as one of the determining factor of community development, especially because the community doesn't have enough strength to mobilize outside help nor the financial means to take on the necessary works for improvement. For example, the paving of the access road to sector 3 in the Colonia de San Rafael, Santa Tecla - El Salvador had been promised during an electoral campaign and in the end thanks to the mobilization of the inhabitants and

their own workforce they managed to buy the material and to build it together. Once the candidate is elected, there is only the presence of the inhabitants and some NGOs to promote the development of the community.

“(...) they say that when a mayor is elected and stays there, they close the doors and the mayor can never be seen. So, it is sad to hear that people who don't do anything, get a big salary and people like us don't get anything. We don't receive any help from the municipality.” (A. Morales)

“The government only comes around when it is time for campaigning, the mayors (...) because they want us to vote for one of them. They come and offer such and such a thing, but in the end, they don't give anything. The last time, they were going to repair the passage way, at the time of the works, we had to go ourselves to buy cement and sand to do it.” (R. Alas)

Like in many places of low income, the colonia de San Rafael, El Salvador and the settlement of the Southern railroad, in Escuintla, are very attractive for political parties during those times because, in general, they see it as a big source of potential votes.

“The government doesn't help (the settlement) at all and it is also not present in the city. Escuintla is the second dirtiest department of all.” (A. Morales).

“The municipality cannot get here, this is a settlement, here no one has papers. So we have to live according to the will of God.” (A. Morales)

The irresponsibility with which public projects for low income communities are taken takes a toll on the spirits of the inhabitants, their self-esteem as citizens, the image that they have of themselves as social actors.

“There was a girl next door who got hepatitis because of the water. With the hydrometer, we paid the right amount, 15 Reales per month, but the water is very bad. In the alleys we don't have light but we do pay 12 Reales per month (for public lightning) sometimes even more.” (F. Pereira)

It's not just the absence or the inaction of the state that causes problems, but also when the government takes action without taking into account the reality in which people live and their necessities, creates even more problems, including an augmentation of the risks for the people who are living in situations of poverty.

Sometimes, the governments will look for new places to live, without previous consultation of the ones who will have to live there, with the result that this type of action will cause one more factor of instability in the life of those who live in a situation of poverty.

“If really the government would come to an agreement with us, we would agree if they wanted to give us some land, not a house like they built in far away places, (but) a piece of land that has the basic services, with a simple wooden house for which they would ask us for installments that we could repay, that would be repayable at the same conditions than the ones we could afford. They don't have to give it to us just ask for a price that would be affordable for us. (G. Chavez)

The vulnerability that comes from living in an area that is constantly being affected by floods like the small settlement of El Rio, on the bank of the river Choluteca in Tegucigalpa, can only be expressed by people who live there and have witnessed countless times how their own house or the one of their neighbors was destroyed by storms or hurricanes that sweep Central America regularly.

D. Guadalupe tells about the damage done by the tropical storm Agatha³, that happened at the end of May 2010, remembering the 20 houses that were taken by the river and the need to keep living like that when the water came down. In the middle of so much trouble in the hostile environment of El Rio, people could still find important ties in their community, strong relationships that give them the strength to face with more dignity because it creates facilities in the group to sustain themselves.

3.2 Emergency assistance

“We didn't have work, we didn't have food, we didn't have beds, we slept on the ground, on a few little mattresses with blankets that we'd been given, but we were in an evangelical church and we didn't have access to many things, we just had to be there, lying in bed, listening to what other people were saying, but we didn't have the chance or the right to an opinion because it was others that were behind us that had “the right” to take for themselves what came for us, our assistance.” (X. Mejilla)

During times of emergency, like during hurricane Mitch in 1998, which had severe consequences for several Central American countries, or the last severe earthquake in Haiti for example, it's very common for foreign aide to come in the form of material donations for the victims. In Honduras, d. Xiomara says that before these donations can reach the places where they're needed, they “have already passed through other hands.” This is how she explains the deviation by local governments, because rather than paying attention to the urgency that they experienced during hurricane Mitch, donations were intercepted by those responsible for distribution; she thinks the deviation was for their families, or for other people who, surely, didn't need them. This means that she, and others, live with smaller rations of daily food, less clothing, and fewer blankets to protect from the cold in the lodges and temporary camps.

³ The storm also affected Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Mexico.

4. The collective actions and local initiatives

4.1 Collective efforts

“(the access bridge) was built by us, as a community, close it with mud, stones and will all the work force. I don't remember which institution helped us with the material: cement and iron but, from there, all the work force came from us (...) I can't remember that they have helped us even once and I have been living here for 30 years.” (A. Castillo)

Floods, air pollution, poor living infrastructure, little or no help from the State, unemployment and many needs to live well in community all make for difficult situations. But even with all these, people don't stop looking for day-to-day solutions to better their family and collective lives or to recognize the efforts that are achieved from one generation to another. Here are some examples:

“(...) What motivates my community, like some people will say during a session: we're going to work...to better the street so that it would look better because it is for ourselves. (...) I worked for my community for more advantages for my community, for love of the community.

(...) An agreement could be for example, that they put in the material and that the community would work. We don't want it all easy but we would like some help, nothing else, just a small collaboration. Here the will, the effort, everyone contributes as they see fit(...) We have to give them a voice, we have to see the one who is not seen because we are here, we are not being seen here. We are in the part that they want to erase.” (A. Morales)

Lots of community organizations find a lot of meaning in the use of all their strength. One person alone has very little means to mobilize the efforts needed for development like the one that is needed here, but thanks to others that will join their efforts, they manage to create a relationship with other inhabitants of each places, knowing every individual situation to know which help they need to look for and to support each other.

“(...) I never liked to sit down and receive. Since I was very little, I was taught that each person had value (...) I have dignity and I don't need the help of other people when I, as a human being, am able to care for myself, my home and my family (...) we were living maybe too focused on 'Oh, poor me, the way I live, what do I know, ...' and there are lots of people around us who, maybe, we don't know because we don't talk to them, who don't know but God gave us those beautiful eyes, to see, right? Not to judge, but to see what is going on with him and what can I do for him.” (A. Morales)

“ The only thing that helped me to start taking care of myself, to work and to have a good relationship with other people, was the

love for my family, the self-improvement of my children, who studied and went ahead in spite of everything” (L. Tepeu)

“(…) because if they tell me that I have to pull material to make the stairs, I have to do it. Sometimes, I even stop grinding maize to go carry some material, like sand, because I want the place where I live to become nicer.” (X. Mejilla)

From meeting all these people, we learned that even in the midst of so many problems, they keep the collective will to better their living conditions, to build improvements that will serve the majority, to believe in individual actions that will also have results for others. Even without the support of the state or, even as having it against them since it ignores the knowledge and the development of people who live in extreme poverty; the communities in the settlements have the strength to improve the streets, to save what is left of the surrounding natural environment, to try to access basic services that will respect their rights as citizens and to keep their dignity as human beings alive.

4.2 The Recycling Plant - El Salvador

“This project (the recycling project) was founded with the earthquake and hurricane Stan⁴. They started this project to strengthen four communities that were affected (...). From there, we started to work and we have seen how important it is, because it helps the environment to recover trash, they don't cover up the drains and to live in a cleaner town (...), better organized. The people have seen with their eyes, have collaborated a lot.” (F. Garcia)

D. Francisco Garcia was a founding member of the Recycling Plant, a project founded by the municipality of Santa Tecla El Salvador, the UNDP⁵ and the leaders of various communities affected by Hurricane Stan in 2005. Although in general there are many inconveniences that compromise the strength of the victims to rebuild their lives, there is also much strength in the people who have found in the tragedy more inspiration to work and evolve. D. Francisco and others that struggle and continue straining today for the functioning of the Plant are examples of this. But the case also points out the inconvenience of having an important support at the beginning of ideas such as this, when the tragedy has the attention of the whole world and is covered in the press, in the guidelines of the international community, and then, as time passes, is forgotten. The economic and technical support sometimes disappears, leaving behind skeletons of initiatives or, where if there is luck, groups of activists continue alone, resisting.

⁴ Considered a hurricane, occurred in October 2005, affecting principally El Salvador and Guatemala, arriving with less force in Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Mexico, leaving a trail of approximately 1620 deaths.

⁵ United Nations Development Program

“We have only managed (the work of the plant) with the goal that it wouldn't stop, but we haven't continued with the goal of any hope. If someone one day sees with good eyes we could have development, because they talk about development but they don't support us. We thought of the UNDP, but at the same time we haven't tried to connect with them (again).” (F. Garcia)

After the first moment that they outlined the project, D. Francisco and his compatriots were without contact with the two institutions to continue working together. They need to develop themselves, but don't have the economic means to do so, however they succeed so that work is not paralyzed.

Without having to wait for the assessment of security and hygiene required by the Ministry of Health, the mayor's office denied the plant the ability to recycle cardboard, lowering the number of workers involved from 15 to 8 people. With this decrease in production, the income and money were impeded. Today, they are trying to start the project up again and they have, in total, 10 employees earning US\$ 50 a month.

4.3 Working and Learning Together: Project TAJ (Trabajar y Aprender Juntos) in Guatemala

A pilot project called Work and Lean Together (*Proyecto TAJ*) has been developed thanks to an initiative begun by full-time volunteers, activists and friends of ATD Fourth World. The project demonstrates an alternative means to more dignified work around the idea of a solidarity economy. The idea for the project came out of a search for different work opportunities for those living in the landfill area. However, due to the proximity of others living in marginalized zones, the number of people reached by the project expanded into other areas.

The project members work together to implement new ideas, find solutions to problem, promote sales and seek other opportunity to get together to build relationships that go beyond work.

“When they were teaching us, I knew that I could not do it. But I knew that I was going to learn and that helped me a lot.” (M. Orozco)

Production increases and the quality of their products is an achievement for the group. Seeking to expand, they sought out other points of sales in markets and stores, as well as contacting people interested by the project within and from out of the country. They not only learned from each other how to make better products, but they also learned to respect their differences, the learning process of each member, their differing opinions and the path to follow in order to develop together.

In imagining the project, the proposition was that TAJ would reach the most disadvantaged, as Mrs. Orozco explains:

“Those people who can no longer get work because of their age, youths(...)who did not receive adequate education, they hear a lot of excuses, they do not find opportunities to work anywhere. Here we have a saying that we do not demand anything because we are working ourselves. It is the responsibility of each of us to come and make our products.” (M. Orozco)

For her, beyond the increase in her budget due to this work opportunity, she also talks about the environment, because all the materials would have ended up in a trash heap.

“This has help us all a lot; one, because we learn and do our part so that trash is not just thrown out, because we know it is useful. Second, because it helps us to support our households. (M. Orozco)

Mrs. Nicolasa López is also a member and views her work as an economic support for her family. Providing the basics for her children is fundamental, but it is also important to be recognized positively for something she does well.

“It is important because it helps me economically, because it provides a space where I can learn and show what I can do. I think this is important, because we learned to respect each other just as we are, with the temperament that each of us has.” (N. Lopez)

When you talk about the project with other participants, it becomes clear that the training or subsidy they receive would serve no purpose if they were not committed to truly changing the way they lived and worked.

“It is different here, no one is the boss and everyone supports each other. That is very important to me, not like in other places where you are humiliated in any variety of ways. I think that if all jobs were like this we would be better off.” (N. Lopez)

This project promotes new and rather distinct relationships than that of traditional companies, and at the same time to not minimize the demand for progress and efficiency, it requires commitment and responsibility. The biggest challenge behind this idea is the capability to build a better society together, to create projects that those who experience extreme poverty on a daily basis, and others, can undertake together.

Projects that promote collective action, solidarity, respect for individuality and responsibility from those who feel ethically committed to the proposed ideas, are changing the concept of work and contributing creativity to it. These new ideas demonstrate feasible alternatives to the current system which has long proved to be out of control and exclusive.

5. Conclusion - Proposals

“I know what can be collected, what to do and not do (...) I could imagine a really large recycling center that would need enough

workers. There would be more opportunities on the planet for work. Is that not true? Because if we take maximum advantage of the trash, we would no longer need to cut down trees, or abuse the earth or water. It would be better and there would be more opportunities for work. Those who reach old age in these jobs would receive retirement and we would support them.” (Mr. Sorto)

The words and actions of the interviewees put human beings at the center of development. Not because of their objective needs, but rather because of their ability to bring deep meaning and value to intelligent solutions based on a commitment to the well being of everyone, inspiring others to create paths of sustainable development with and for all.

This idea not only offers alternatives in their lives, but is a major contribution to finding solutions to global problems that affect the whole of humanity. Certainly they will have to be considered fundamental actors in whichever development models claim to be sustainable.